

Calidity

by Okobo-chan

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Chizuru/Many

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****Calidity****

Chizuru was a consummate optimist. It was what had buoyed her to venture from her home to Kyoto to search for her father rather than writing him off as dead, and what had kept her anchored to the Shinsengumi rather than giving into Kazama's demands or O-Sen's entreaties. She searched for the bright spots in her days, holding onto the moments where she could make herself useful and secure in her own worth. But sometimes even she could lose sight of the horizon.

It was a grey day. Dark clouds hovered over the horizon, tall puffed thunderheads that soared heavenwards and blocked the remaining sunlight from the already darkening afternoon. The past few days had been overcast and rainy as well, throwing the large complex they inhabited into perpetual shadow. Chizuru had spent many of the passing hours cooped up indoors to avoid the rain, shuttered behind closed shoji against the cooling fall air by herself as the division captains went about their duties. She'd spent many of those slowly

passing hours examining herself and her current circumstances. The gloom had begun to get the better of her.

She'd found her life coming up short in a multitude of aspects. She'd not only not found her father, but was now trapped masquerading as a boy in order to find him. She labored in a marginal capacity for a group of elite ronin who were forced to protect her not only against their own opponents but those brought on by her state of birth. While her similarly aged friends were at home raising families, she was surrounded by brave and handsome men who were as far beyond her reach as the clouds themselves. She was well aware that she was both plain to look at and unmarriageable. Why would any of them want a woman that wasn't even human?

"Chizuru."

Her head jerked, and she nearly dropped the tea that she was setting down next to Hijikata-san's tray. It splashed over her hand, and she let out a soft hiss as the scalding liquid trickled down her fingers. Hijikata frowned, reaching into his kimono to fish out a tenugui that he handed to her without ceremony. Chizuru's face was in flames as she began mopping at her fingers with the soft cotton cloth.

"Ha-Hai, Harada-san!"

"Are you well?" Sanosuke's bright saffron eyes bore down on her.

"Ah," she paused, willing her most reassuring smile to appear, "Hai!"

Serving the rest of the meal was uneventful, but she could feel their eyes following her. It made her melancholy even more acute. Inwardly, she felt her failures build that much more for worrying them. After finishing up the dishes, both embarrassed and even more ill at ease, she'd retreated to a deserted engawa just off the inner rooms to further ruminate. When it began to pour, the wind blowing misty gusts of icy water past the eaves, dripping into her hair and soaking through her juban, she barely registered it. So there she fell asleep against the cold, polished floor; wallowing in her misery.

* * *

><p>Waking to the sunrise, her entire body ached in a way lack of cushion couldn't be blamed. Even soaking in the furo before beginning breakfast did little to ease her protesting body. But the days tasks did not cease needing done for the tired. So she pushed onwards despite her shaky nausea, chopping and stirring over the stiflingly hot ceramic kamado, determined to feed the men who kept her safe. Her mind was filled with recipes to maximize their health, just as she'd learned at her fathers side with his patients. Her usefulness kept her on her feet. Despite the world spinning as she knelt, slowly pushing the shoji open before entering the room with the first tray, she took a deep breath with angry denial and pushed past it. Barely a moment later, her strength of will shot straight past her stamina.<p>

Her cheerful greeting trailed off as she rose to step into the room, tilting to meet the floor in a dead faint.

Shinpachi, nearest to her, reached out to pull her into his lap as Heisuke futilely scrambled after him for the falling tray. The crash of ceramic to hardwood barely registered for most of the rooms inhabitants as they crowded around Chizuru's senseless form.

"Chizuru!"

"Chizuru-chan!"

"Yukimura-kun!"

Shinpachi gently shook her to no avail as Hijikata barked at Heisuke to fetch the surgeon, his hands cool on her burning forehead.

* * *

><p>Chizuru felt as if someone was sitting on her chest. Languishing in that in between place, half asleep yet aware with her eyes too heavy to lift, she struggled to hone in on her surroundings. A cool towel lay across her brow, barely dulling the seeping heat that engulfed her entire body. She was sweaty and uncomfortable under the heavy layers of kake-futon. Soon after awakening she began to cough, dryness thickening on her tongue and throat uncomfortably. Strong hands gently pushed under her body, steadying her head and curling her upper body against a cool lap. Roughly calloused fingers nudged her lips open, and pressed a cup to her mouth as cool water dripped past her tongue. She sputtered as it stuck in her throat, coughing the liquid over herself as her eyes finally opened enough for her to peer up at Saitou as he leaned over her.<p>

Saitou slowly lowered her back to the futon, reaching over to grab a white tenugui. She peered up at him as he softly dried her face and dabbed at her throat, eyes flickering to her barely lucid gaze.

"Saitou-san?"

"Ah."

She coughed, violently, dislodging the wet compress on her forehead. Saitou retrieved it, dipping it into a waiting bowl of water to replace it back on her brow. Shakily, she reached up a hand to press the wonderfully cool sensation further back past her eyes, and their hands unexpectedly brushed. His were swiftly pulled into his kimono sleeves as he respectfully sat back on his haunches. Chizuru's stomach dropped. Was her touch so repulsive?

"Sumimasen," she managed to gasp out, before she slipped back under the inky veil that surrounded Saitou's seemingly placid gaze.

After waiting a few moments to be sure she slept, Saitou gently moved her uncovered hand back under the covers before brushing her soaked bangs away from her flushed cheeks. Sitting back once again, he trained his ears on her even breaths as he began to pray.

* * *

><p>The first thing her foggy mind latched on to was the heady

perfume of sake. In her brief moments of wakefulness, it seemed that she had lost all sense of time passing except in increments of the local doctor or Yamazaki-san forcing doses of medicine down her throat. Her blurred vision registered green, and she knew it had to be Shinpachi-san. And where one went..<p>

"I can't stand this. There must be something more to be done."

"What else can we possibly do, Heisuke?"

"What about trying to contact O-Sen, maybe there's some kind of oni medicine."

"Kid, if she heals faster than us what's some herbal remedy gonna do for this?"

"Enough. You've disturbed her rest," Sanosuke-san's nearby voice suddenly interjected, as Chizuru felt him move to straighten the now multiple blankets that covered her shivering body. She heard the others shifting, fidgeting as they apologized before getting up to fetch more water from the well.

"Ha.. Harada-sa.."

Chizuru wanted to speak, to reassure him that all was well but the words wouldn't form on her lips. A cough began deep in her chest, battering outwards and she heaved and choked on the sickness working its way out of her lungs. Sanosuke had pulled her into his arms, bending her over as he held a cloth to her face to catch her sputum. She heard his breathing hitch, lips close to her ear as he held her, as her breath caught laboriously and she struggled to breathe.

As her cough settled down into a rattle, she felt him settle her further into his arms, hands rubbing her own as she struggled to regain full consciousness. She felt him shudder once, then tighten his hold as her head lolled backwards on his chest. His breath felt cool to her overheated skin as he drew his face close to her her own once again.

"Please don't leave me, Chizuru," he choked out. The shoji noisily slid open, and she felt his tears begin to drip down her throat onto her already damp juban.

"Hey, I don't think it's going to pay out for you to flirt with her when she can't hear you."

"_Shut up_, Shinpachi," He moaned, still clutching at one hand as his other stroked her forehead, wet face hidden against her hair. "She can hear me."

"Alright Sano, time to put missy back to bed before she catches a chill."

Sleep was overtaking her as she heard the two other men struggle with Sano to let her go.

"I never knew Sano-san to be a maudlin drunk or you the older brother type, Shinpat-san."

"Only in times like these, kid."

* * *

><p>Her breathing was harsh, even to her own ears. Rasping and rattling deep in her chest, echoing in the mostly empty room. The familiar sound of wet cloth being wrung out filtered into her ears, then she felt a compress once again pressed to her brow. Her lips felt cracked, breath whispering over them painfully as she tried futilely to wet them. Blurry vision registered Hijikata-san at her side, propping her head up as he slipped bitter tasting liquid down her throat, massaging it as she struggled to swallow. She heard his low rumbling timbre alongside Yamazaki-san's, then gentle fingers were pressing something soothing against the chapped skin.<p>

A shoji slid open, the bright light blinding her until it closed as she tried to lift her hand to the man beside her. Her fingers were intercepted as they touched his grey hakama. Hijikata-san held it, awkwardly squeezing as she suddenly made the connection between being pulled out of her fever induced nightmares in much the same manner. Her hand was dropped as she began to cough, moving to press a cup of water to her parched mouth. This was shameful. The Vice-Commander was nursing her. Chizuru knew how busy, how needed he was. In her delirium, she began to push away from him.

Hijikata's silence was absolute. He sat stock still, unmoving for several long and torturous moments as Chizuru began to scream internally at herself. Willing her exhausted body to move towards him, all she could manage was to turn her face towards his own. Her eyes, large and luminous, bore into his own before he forced himself to turn away. He bowed low, prostrating his shoulders over his knees as she gasped in horror.

"Sumimasen."

She shook her head as best she could, hand falling towards him as his eyes grew liquid.

"Chizuru, I..," he paused uncertainly. "I.."

Those same eyes slammed shut as he rose to take his leave with a bowed head, Shimada-san calling to him from the outside corridor. Silence closed in around her.

* * *

><p>It was cold. So very, very cold. Her teeth chattered and her muscles burned, every gasping breath was torment to her raw throat. Her entire body felt as heavy as lead. She gasped and shook, listening to the movement around her wondering if she was underwater. It certainly felt so.<p>

People were arguing. Her body was lifted, then set down, the lifted again as whoever was trying to move her struggled with whoever they were arguing with. Chizuru couldn't concentrate past her own hearts deafening pounding in her ears to tell the difference in tenor. Whoever picked her up was running. The wind in her face made her shudder with cold all the more. She was set down again. The air, wherever she was, was warm and moist, easier to breath. There was rustling of clothing, then she was picked back up again. Willing her eyes to open, she felt strong arms and bare skin.

Suddenly she was immersed in hot water. The temperature difference was so stark that she let out a choked cry, awakening her to the world as she struggled to lift herself out of the boiling water.

"You have to stay in." Okita-san's bright vert gaze loomed over her, backdropped by the bathhouse ceiling. He cursed softly as tears of agony began to slip down her cheeks, and she continued to struggle against his hold. Growling, he vaulted a leg over the side of the deep furo and got into the water with her. Pulling her soaking juban covered shoulders against his bare chest, he began to rub her arms, dunking them both into the steaming water. Chizuru felt his wrappings against her own bare skin as his legs entwined to hers, keeping her from pushing her body out of the water.

"I need you warm and I need you alive. You're staying in until you're warm again."

The world swam as she began to cough, and his hands moved to her back, soothing her as she heaved against his clavicle. Okita growled, holding her head above the water as she began to fade. He shook her, rubbing at her cheeks and stroking her wet hair away from her eyes as he watched her lose consciousness. Her breathing was shallow.

"More wood, Yamazaki!," He yelled. "I need more heat!"

He gathered her close, furiously rubbing at her her arms as her body convulsed under him. Okita could feel the press of death around her, as he had so often himself. He snarled.

"You can't have her, damn you."

* * *

><p>Chizuru blinked at the ceiling, flickering candlelight reflected in its recesses. It was dark again, the new moon pitch black in the cracked window, leaving her wondering how many days had past. She felt... better. Not well, but better. She felt neither overheated or freezing, and though her throat was still raw it wasn't unbearable. She also didn't feel the need to cough for the time being. Slowly, she sat up, peering into the dark room around her.<p>

She found herself surrounded by sleeping Shinsengumi officers. Hijikata was propped up in a corner, Okita slept on the floor next to her right, and Sano, Heisuke and Shinpachi were huddled at the foot of her futon. Even Saitou had drifted off against the wall to her left. Sannan, Shimada and Kondou were the only ones absent, to no surprise. Yamazaki's pale, wan face stared back at her, speculatively, as she twisted to look at whoever was hovering behind her pillow.

"Yukimura-san, I'm very glad to see you awake," he whispered, a tired but genuine smile lighting his face. "You've been very ill."

Chizuru took in the men slumbering around her with a soft and slow gaze. She felt blanketed with their simple regard.

"I'm better now."

And she meant it in all ways.

* * *

><p>Glossary:

Shoji - Traditional sliding doors made of wood and paper

Engawa - Porch that surrounds a traditional home

Tenugui - Towel

Juban - Under-kimono

Furo - Traditional soaking tub

Kamado - Traditional cooking pot for rice etc., the precursor to the stove or oven

Kake-futon - Heavy blanket for futon mattress

Sumimasen - I'm sorry

****Authors Notes:****

Woo boy, this one was a doozy. It had been rattling around in my brain for a while, messing up my flow for another ongoing story and bothering the crap out of me until I finished it. It started as a "spark notes" version of basic plot events that I jotted down before going to sleep one night, until I slowly fleshed it out after a couple of days. I'm still not 100% satisfied with it, but, I'm always like that with open endings. Hopefully there isn't a lot of overuse of Japanese. I try not to do that, but with a story like Hakuouki it's difficult. Some words just don't translate their full meanings very well and I'd rather the Japanese.

End
file.